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SUBJECT: USUN DISCUSSION WITH SPANISH MOD OFFICIALS ON
UNIFIL

REF: STATE 105467

Classified By: Ambassador Alex D. Wolff for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Ambassador Wolff met on November 9 with a delegation from the Spanish Ministry of Defense who were in New York to meet with the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) to discuss Spain's candidate for the UNIFIL Force Commander position. Luis Cuesta, Secretary General of Defense Policy, and Lieutenant General Jose Luis Lopez Rose, Chief of Joint Defense Staff, were accompanied by the Spanish Perm Rep Juan Antonio Yanez-Barnuevo, the Political Counselor, and a MOD staffer. Cuesta emphasized that Spain is ready to assume the UNIFIL command in January 2010, seeks a smooth transition of command, and has started the four-month training of the forces that would accompany the Force Commander, including a protection and security company; core headquarters staff; a helicopter group; civil-military staff; and national staff. (Note: Ambassador Wolff spoke with DPKO Under Secretary-General LeRoy on November 9 who said that the UN is not going to ask the Italian government to extend the current UNIFIL Force Commander, and both Israel and Lebanon have backed away from their requests for such an extension. End note.)

¶2. (C) Cuesta underscored that the Government of Spain understands the complex environment in which UNIFIL operates. He noted that the Spanish battalion's sector in the UNIFIL area of operations is a potentially difficult area given that it includes northern Ghajar, is on the Syrian border, and near the Sheb'a Farms. Nevertheless, he said, the Spanish forces have managed to keep the situation calm and stable. He did note that Major General Asarta, one of the two Spanish candidates for UNIFIL Force Commander (comment: and we understand the leading candidate), served previously with UNIFIL as a brigade commander. Cuesta said that the UN's decision on which of the two Spanish candidates to name as Force Commander is presently with the Secretary-General.

¶3. (C) Cuesta said that the GOS is aware of the possibility that the Italian government could decide to pull out from UNIFIL more Italian forces than just the headquarters group, and that Spain is prepared to use its diplomatic resources to generate third country provision of additional troops. (Note: He clearly did not commit Spain to providing any additional troops beyond the replacement headquarters group. End note.) He commented that Spain's assumption of the EU Presidency in January 2010 would also provide it with additional leverage to mobilize further resources. Ambassador Wolff relayed his understanding, per his November 6 conversation with Assistant Secretary-General Edmond Mulet, that the Italian government has guaranteed to the UN that it will not reduce its forces to UNIFIL at this time beyond removing the headquarters group.

¶4. (C) Ambassador Wolff stressed to the delegation that the next UNIFIL Force Commander will face a different set of

challenges than has the current UNIFIL Force Commander. He noted the clear reintroduction of weaponry into Lebanon by Hizballah and highlighted the increased rocket launches into northern Israel from the UNIFIL area of operations. All indicate that capacities are being built up for another conflict, he stressed. UNIFIL needs to maintain a high operational tempo in order maintain the calm, he said, and to ensure the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to do their utmost in the south. He also cited the need for candor with the Council from the next UNIFIL Force Commander on where it is being impeded, where it needs its mandate enhanced, and where the LAF is not doing enough. General Lopez Rose commented that while the LAF wants to do more and is willing to do more, they do not have enough resources. He emphasized that their main mission is north of the Litani river and the real question is how weapons can be controlled there.

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